

What Next for the U.S. in Libya?

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March 25, 2011

In 2002-3, President George W. Bush wanted to go to war in Iraq in the worst way possible; and that is more or less exactly what he did. Bush led the country to war based upon a very flimsy rationale, without strong international support and with no clear recognition of the extent or nature of the American commitment which would be required to succeed. The result has been that the war, after eight years this month, has been far more difficult than expected, success has been elusive, costs have been exorbitant and American standing in the world has suffered substantially. A central lesson of Bush's rush to war, which is sufficiently obvious that it may not need restating is that it is much easier to get into conflicts like Iraq, that it is to get out.

Although the situation in Libya in 2011 is quite different than that in Iraq in 2003, the way Bush went to war in Iraq still partially framed the decision and options facing the Obama administration in recent weeks. The decision to establish a no fly zone over parts of Libya may or may not have been the right thing to do, but the process for arriving at this decision is different. This time, for example, the administration secured support from key European allies in a collaborative way. Although much of the heavy military lifting will be done by the U.S., the perception that this is truly an allied effort is extremely important.

Additionally, the administration clearly established the boundaries within which it would confine this action from the beginning. The pledges of no ground troops in the beginning of the conflict place a limit on the extent of potential U.S. and European involvement in Libya. This pledge is not, of course, written in stone, but it will be hard to backtrack on this without building very widespread political support.

The way the administration pursued this policy underscored that it is not just necessary to make the right foreign policy decisions, but also to implement these decisions in the right way. There are good reasons both for and against the no fly zone, but by going about it in a more thoughtful way, the administration both increased the chances of the policy succeeding, but also of beginning to establish some different precedents in foreign policy. If a legacy of the Obama administration becomes that the U.S. is again serious about building international coalitions and that we can effectively implement limited military operations, it will be a substantial contribution to U.S. foreign policy.

There are, however, some other aspects of the decision to implement the no fly zone that are somewhat more complicated. First, while the support from the Arab League clearly gave the U.S. and its European allies some political cover for this decision, making it harder for critics to describe this intervention as yet another example of western militarism in the Arab world, it also sets something of a strange precedent. Stressing the role of the Arab League in this decision comes close to suggesting that the intervention

occurred because the Arab League requested it. This sets a new and rather strange bar for western intervention. The U.S. cannot be in a position where it is expected to intervene every time the Arab League requests it. This is unlikely, but it is not unlikely that the next time the Arab League wants a U.S. intervention, the expectation will be there and a U.S. decision not to intervene will create rancor and charges of hypocrisy.

Second, while the no fly zone sets a new precedent for U.S., and western intervention, due to the threat of widespread human rights violations. By the time the no fly zone was established, the situation in Libya had evolved into something of a grey area between civil war and a civilian population suffering widespread human rights violations at the hands of a dictator. It may be that this intervention will save thousands of lives, but it is also certainly possible that this intervention will ultimately be viewed as part of a broader Libyan conflict.

There are good reasons to intervene in a country to prevent or stop a genocide, but it is not at all obvious that this was the situation in Libya. Gaddafi's threats towards his own people clearly were outrageous and frightening, but the extent to which he had the means to implement his nefarious promises is far from clear. If the trip wire for intervening to prevent widespread crimes against humanity means every time a possibly unhinged, and politically weak, leader makes murderous threats, it will set a precedent that will likely lead to considerably more calls for U.S. intervention in the future.

President Obama's foreign policy has been characterized by a great deal of prudence, which critics might describe as excessive caution or timidity. Obama did not rush to intervene in Libya, just as the administration did not rush to call for the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt a few weeks previously. The pace and nature of the decision to intervene, however, is probably less important than the pace and nature of how this intervention will be concluded. That represents the greater and more important challenge.